

# Handy Tips for Driving in and around Tuscany

Enjoy the *Dolce Vita* in Italia! We do want you to have a safe and fun time driving around Italy. The first thing to keep in mind is when you **rent a car in Italy**, you actually get two cars: the car that you're driving and another one stuck to your back bumper. It is important to know that you can completely ignore the vehicle behind you, especially on a rural road. Just keep driving at a comfortable pace in your lane and remember to signal any turns well in advance. The driver behind may zoom around you and don't be surprised if it is a little old lady in a Fiat Panda.



Before you go to Italy, you must get an **International Driver License** at a AAA store in the USA – it translates your driver license information to many languages including Italian and is essential especially if the officer speaks no English (many do not).

**Renting Cars:** Most of the cars in Italy are small and have manual transmissions. When renting a car if you need an automatic transmission, be sure to specify that in advance when making the reservation. It might cost a little more and the selection may be limited. Note that the car rental companies at the major airports can be more expensive: we have found better deals at rental agencies a short taxi ride away, plus you can get vans and specialty vehicles.

**Rural Roads:** The speed limit on a Tuscan rural country road might be posted out 90 kilometers an hour, however some of the local Italians seem to think that the speed limit is somewhere near infinity. Once again drive at a comfortable pace near the speed limit and watch the road signs while your passengers look at the scenery. The speed limits on rural roads can change quickly as you approach a village, so it is a good idea to slow down sooner than the speed limit indicates. Keep an eye out for the orange **Autovelox** boxes which indicate a speed trap even if you're only a few kilometers over the speed limit: these devices can take photos of your car and license plate then a ticket is sent. You can buy a very nice case of Brunello di Montalcino for the cost of one speeding ticket. We received a speeding ticket for when we were approaching Venice a few kilometers over the limit and the authorities charged the credit card we used to rent the car.



**Road Signs:** Green signs indicate a motorway (**Autostrada**) usually with a toll, Blue signs are suburban roads, White signs are for local roads, and Brown signs are for scenic roads and places of historical interest. Having a front seat navigator really helps: they can review the route in advance and know the route, plus help watch for the road signs.



When stopping at a red light, right turns after stopping are **ILLEGAL**. This is true in all of Europe. Just wait until the light turns green (it is also much safer that way).

**Using GPS in Italy:** A dedicated GPS unit works quite well, and it doesn't rely on a cell signal. I downloaded all the maps of Europe into my Garmin and it works great. You can also rent a car with the GPS built into the dashboard display. However, you can use your cell phone keeping in mind that it may not always have a signal and may have a delay in showing you the turns. If you are driving along a country road you may miss a turn because the instructions can be several seconds slow. In a big city the tall buildings can also mess with the GPS signal. Using the GPS verbal instructions can be quite helpful as you are busy avoiding other cars, such as "At the roundabout, take the second exit" to set you in the right direction. It does help to preview your route using a good old-fashioned **paper map** in which you can see the overall route (and it may indicate some interesting side trips). After you set your designation, keep your eye on the estimated **arrival time**. As you drive along following the instructions and you see the arrival time suddenly is **higher** - that means you have missed a turn! The modern GPS system will

reroute you heading the same direction, which may result in a much longer scenic route around the lake or down the valley to the next village before going back. It may save a significant amount of time to just turn around on a rural country road or in a village can be tricky, which is why

**Special Hint:** When going to a village, set the destination for a Parking Lot there. If you just enter the village name, it may direct you to the town center – probably in a **ZTL**.

GPS systems rarely recommend turning around. Sometimes it is better to go into a parking lot or side road or winery to turn around.

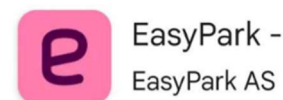
**ZTL: Zona Traffico Limitato.** Most cities and old villages have historic centers (**Centro Storico**) which are pedestrian areas. You must not drive into these areas. Only vehicles that have special permits are authorized to enter or park there. There are many cameras so the local authorities can document violations and send out zone violations with a semi-polite request to send them money. You can get several tickets: entering the area, parking, driving inside, and driving out all may be ticketed. Non Molto Bene! (Not Good).



**Parking:** Most of the villages have designated parking lots or street parking outside of the Centro Storico. A **white stripe** (or no stripe) on the street or curb indicates free parking, **yellow or orange stripes** are for resident and business permit parking only, a **red stripe** is a no parking area, and **Handicap** spots are clearly marked. While the **white stripe** is free parking, watch for any blue time limit signs. When you finally find a spot, you can write your arrival time on a piece of paper (24 hour days) and leave it on your dash. Or place a **Disco Orario** on your dash to indicate your arrival time (these can be found at a Tabac or gas stations and other stores). The local Polizia do check for violations, and they will write you a ticket if you exceed the maximum time frame.



With the **blue stripe** it is a pay zone: look for the Blue P Signs (a pagamento), check the times when payment is needed, then pay using the nearest kiosk. Some kiosks will print out a ticket to put on your dash, and others you enter your vehicle license number and a ticket is not displayed. The kiosks will normally take Euro coins or a credit card and you just need to follow the instructions. It is a good idea to download the **EasyPark** App in advance so you can pay using your cell phone (plus you can add time remotely if needed). Look for the pink E logo on the Kiosk. We have found that Italians are helpful if you have any difficulty with the screens and obtaining a ticket.



**Special Hint:** After parking your car do **NOT** open your trunk and place valuables in there. Bad people may be watching you who will pry open your trunk after you leave. Plan ahead and place those items there in advance. Never leave any valuables visible on the seats.

**Parking Garages:** Larger towns like Assisi, Siena, or Florence have large underground parking garages. They have a very tight entrance and small parking spots, so don't even try if you are driving an SUV. Watch out for the posts and stanchions. Get a ticket as you enter, take it with you, and pay at the kiosk before going back to your car.

The Italian **Polizia** check randomly for automobile and driver license documentation. They may be on the side of the road or at an intersection, and will pull cars over with wands which have a red dot on the end. If they look at you and wave that wand in front of you, pull over and show your international driver license with the rental car documentation (you can tell them you're a hapless tourist). Then they will send you on your way.



**Strade Panoramica:** These are country roads that have great scenery, sometimes on both sides. Excellent ones are from Montisi to San Giovanni d'Asso, Pienza to San Quirico d'Orcia, and Asciano to the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. All are a short drive from Castelmuzio.

**White Roads:** Around Tuscany there are many local roads surfaced with white gravel called **Strada Bianche** which can be very scenic with much less traffic. They are good for hikes and mountain bikes (E-Bikes help because they can be quite hilly). If you see a person walking or a bicycle, go very slow past them to keep the dust and rocks to a minimum, and admire



the olive groves and vineyards. If it is very dry, the entire back end of your car can be covered with white road dust. Do keep in mind that these and most rural roads can be very dark at night with very few streetlights, and you may even encounter a wild boar. Best to drive in daylight and watch the wonderful scenery.

**Autostrade Driving:** These are nicely paved and well maintained high-speed motorways. Most have fees based on the length of your route. When you first enter the Autostrada there will be a toll booth – pick a lane with a green light where you can pull a ticket (**biglietto**) which designates your entry point and time of entering the motorway. Make darn sure you get a ticket – punch the big red button if needed. If you fail to have one at your exit, they can charge you for the entire length of the motorway ... up to 60 Euros depending on the route.



Right after the toll booth there can be two directions, like to Rome or Florence. If you are driving from Rome to Orvieto, follow the Florence signs. If you choose wrong, it can be a 20-minute drive to the next exit where you can exit and re-enter (and more toll booths). In Italy the Autostrade routes are not designated by direction (North, South, East or West) – only the major cities on the way.

**Special Hint:** Don't put the ticket right next to your cell phone. It could demagnetize it, making the exit a problem.

When you enter the Autostrade where the speed limit is 130 kilometers an hour, sometimes the entrance ramps can be very short ..... too short to get up to speed and merge in comfortably especially if you have a car with a teeny motor. If you do not have a clear space to merge into the traffic at a much lower speed than the other cars, the protocol is to stop your car on the on ramp and wait for a larger space to enter the roadway. The huge trucks go along the motorway at 130 kilometers an hour have a difficult time stopping and you don't want to get in their way. Some of the big rig drivers seem to think they have a 10 ton Ferrari, so be aware that they may change lanes fast.

Keep in mind that the 130 kilometer an hour speed limit is actively enforced: the authorities will check your entrance time onto the motorway and check your exit time to calculate your average speed over the distance - then send you a ticket if you exceed the limit. If you are driving a rental vehicle the ticket could be sent directly to your rental car agency who can (and will) charge the credit card that you used to rent the vehicle. There are also speed cameras on rural roads especially as you approach a village. Some GPS devices have warnings about those cameras.....which are not always accurate. The motorways can also feature a **Safety Tutor** system (Ha!) which has cameras every ten or fifteen kilometers to calculate your speed – and automatically alert the local authorities who will issue a speeding ticket. But hey, isn't going about 80MPH fast enough? That is faster than just about anywhere on USA freeways.



On the motorways, I have found that most Italian drivers don't bother to signal a lane change, so be aware of the vehicles around you and use caution. And some drivers just don't seem to pay much attention to the lane markers.

**The Left Lane is a Passing Lane:** It is the law. Stay out of the left lane if you are not actually passing other vehicles. If you wander into the left lane for a while, you might find an aggressive Italian driver flashing their high beams at your rear-view mirror. Plus, it is not uncommon to get a ticket for “camping out” in the left lane.

Please note that there are few entrances and exits on the Autostrada .... much fewer than on USA freeways. If there is an accident that blocks all the lanes, there may not be an exit to avoid it. We have had a few times where everything stopped for an hour or more. Time to relax and send funny messages on your cell phone. The local Italians may get out of their car and go pee, light a cigarette, or chat with other drivers while waving their arms.

Driving a long segment of your trip on a **Sunday** is a good idea. Most large transportation vehicles and trucks are prohibited that day (there are a few exceptions like gas trucks and milk trucks). It makes for a more pleasant and safer experience, and you can see more scenery and not the sides of huge trucks.



We have found that the **AUTOGRILL** locations on the Autostrade can be quite good, with restaurants and shops in addition to fuel and rest rooms. It can be a good place to stretch your legs and grab a snack and a beverage. I have seen the big rig drivers gulp a cappuccino, munch a croissant with a shot of clear liquid (grappa?) then head back down the motorway.

**Restrooms (anywhere):** The facilities can vary wildly in terms of smell, cleanliness, and supplies. Always bring some tissues and sanitary hand wipes. Bring some coins too – there may be a small charge. The good news is that the restrooms with a fee are generally cleaner and have the necessary supplies. Many of the small villages have a public restroom. You can ask “Dove il bagno, per favore?”.



**Getting fuel for your car:** Keep in mind that many cars in Italy are **diesel** - double check the inside of your fuel cap door to make sure you're using the correct pump. The pump nozzle is normally black or yellow for diesel (B7) and green for gasoline (Sensa Piombo E5 or E10). Many of the self-service pumps only accept debit cards with a PIN, and figuring out the payment kiosk can be tricky. Sometimes it is easier to drive to the Service (**Servizio**) pumps and tell the attendant “Il Pieno, Per Favore” to have them fill it up. They might even clean your windshield. Be prepared to pay

significantly more than in the USA for fuel!

**Exiting the Motorway:** The exit ramps can also be very short so slow down early. When you arrive at your desired exit and go to the toll booth, select a lane with a green light for the cash and card, or card only. Insert the ticket into the slot, and the display will tell you the amount owed. You can use a credit card, cash, or coins to pay for the toll. Keep in mind that the credit card reader doesn't always work, so it is a good idea to keep some euro bills and coins handy. If the lane with the real live attendant is open (the sign with a hand on it), that is a good option.



**Types of Law Enforcement in Italy:** the **Polizia di Stato** (State Police) is a civilian police force primarily responsible for public order and security. The Arma di **Carabinieri** is the national military police force (their name comes from the carabina rifle they traditionally carried a long time ago). Both can issue traffic violations and check your vehicle documentation.

**Drinking and Driving.** Just don't do it. The penalties can include jail time, a criminal offense, and fines can be up to 6,000 Euros. The penalties start at a blood alcohol limit of 0.5 grams of alcohol per liter of blood (yes .... really quite low), and there are severe consequences if the blood alcohol level is above 0.8 grams per liter of blood.

**Emergency Numbers:** The Single Emergency Number in most of Europe is 112 for any emergency. It may not be available in ALL regions however the usual numbers should work: 118 for an ambulance, 112 for Carabinieri, 113 Traffic Police, and 115 for Fire Brigade. Most of the operators speak English.

**Please do enjoy your time in Italy!** I have tried to make these tips informative and interesting based on my observations and experiences. I tried to keep it all up to date, however I cannot guarantee accuracy, completeness, or reliability of this information. Keep in mind that you need to obey all the traffic laws (not just the ones mentioned here) and you drive at your own risk.

